Towards "authentic" digital scenography:
[*On a journey towards a*] new materialist approach to media technology within performance design

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Why *authenticity?*

The search for authenticity is one of the main drivers for building relationships and retaining audiences in cultural organizations.

Rentschler and Radbourne (2008, 241)

The greater the perception of authenticity, the greater the audience enjoyment.

Radbourne, Johanson, Glow and White (2009, 27, 20)

Authenticity is now sought after within the performing arts.

Schulze (2017,1)

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Defining Authenticity – Three Constructs

"a form of truth within the performing arts event"
Radbourne at al, 2009, 20

"the condition or quality of realness. When we say that something is authentic, we mean that we find it genuine, the real thing, and not false, counterfeit, or an imitation"
Vannini and Burgess 2009, 104

"emotional perception"
Radbourne et al, 2009, 20

"mainly an emotional component"
Au et al., 2016, 41)

<u>TRUTHFULNESS</u>

<u>BELIEVABILITY</u>

<u>EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT</u>

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Defining Authenticity – Three Constructs

In Rixon, Moyle, Hutchison & McKinney, 2021

'Authenticity' in the context of digital [scenography] is defined as the truthful and believable integration of technology within a performance – relative to the work's dramaturgical and scenographic intent – to aid in the audience's emotional engagement

Rixon et al., 2021, p.255

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Defining Authenticity – Three Constructs

TRUTHFULNESS

"The truthful application of technology *in relation/subject to the context* of the directorial, dramaturgical and scenographic intent of the work. Is it an afterthought, or is it essential to the core of the work?"

BELIEVABILITY

"The capacity of the technology to achieve believability, meaning and representation, relative to the work. Does it feel natural and genuine, or does it feel fake or forced?"

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

"The ability of the technology to evoke an emotional response within the audience. Does integrating technology increase the audience's emotional engagement?"

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The paradox of authenticity in theatre

Theatre has in the twentieth century been the one place that had the highest chance of being perceived as real precisely because it so obviously carried the signs of its own fakeness.
Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance (Schulze 2017, 11)

See also Rixon, Moyle, Hutchison & McKinney, 2021

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Grappling with the paradoxes and the 'posts'

Authenticity in a post–*modern*/*structuralist*/*truth*/*digital* context?
(Kinghorn 2020; Scheer & O'Gorman 2021; Causey 2016; Cramer 2015; Jarvis and Savage 2021)

Metamodernism

Metamodernism oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity.
Vermeulen & van den Akker (2017 5-6)

Metamodernism allows for authentic experience that is not parody or nostalgia but is <u>genuinely real while everyone knows that it is fake</u>.
Schulze (2017)

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The digital's claim to authenticity?

"The focus on the conative materiality of all forms organic and inorganic [produces] the possibility of a perception of the agency of the inorganic. In these terms, both human and non-human agents in contemporary performance can be said to possess a dramatic potency that is readable in terms of human experience"

New Media Dramaturgy Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer 2017, 10 emphasis added

McKinney (2015 and 2019) framework for scenographic materialism

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From *defining* to *understanding* authenticity

A "thick" description (Schulze 2017, 7)

Research Question
How can the concept of authenticity inform the creation of digital scenography within live performance?

Sub-questions
1. How can authenticity be understood within digital scenography?
2. How do professional practitioners design digital scenographies in authentic ways?
3. How does the perception of digital scenography impact an audience's perception of a performance's authenticity?
4. What framework, informed by the practice of Australian performance professionals and audience perceptions of authenticity, could support the creation of authentic digital scenographies?

Research Design

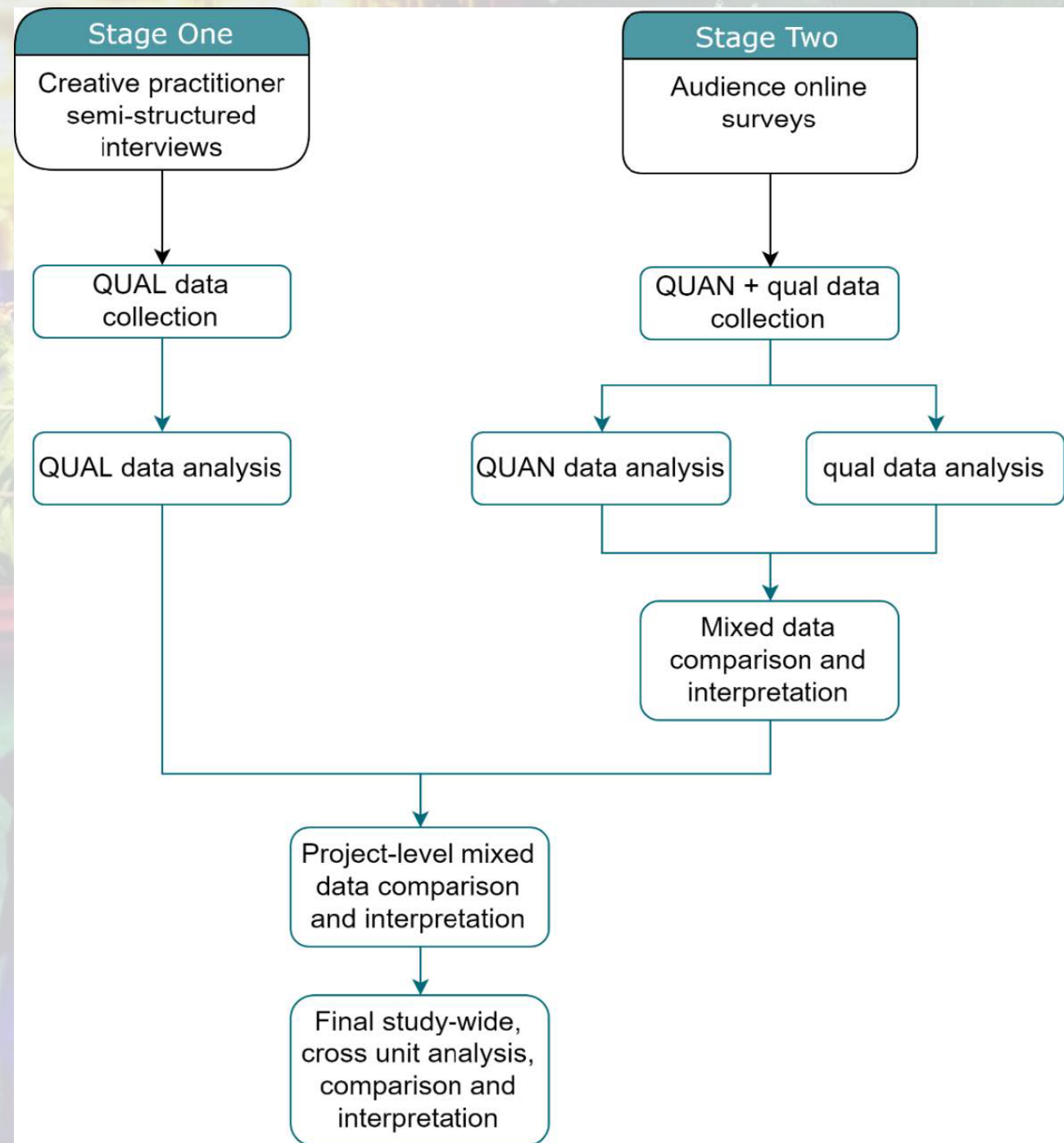Convergent parallel mixed methods design
(Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011)

Two 'cases'/productions

1. *Boy Swallows Universe* (Queensland Theatre 2021)
2. *Ishmael* (Dead Puppet Society 2021)

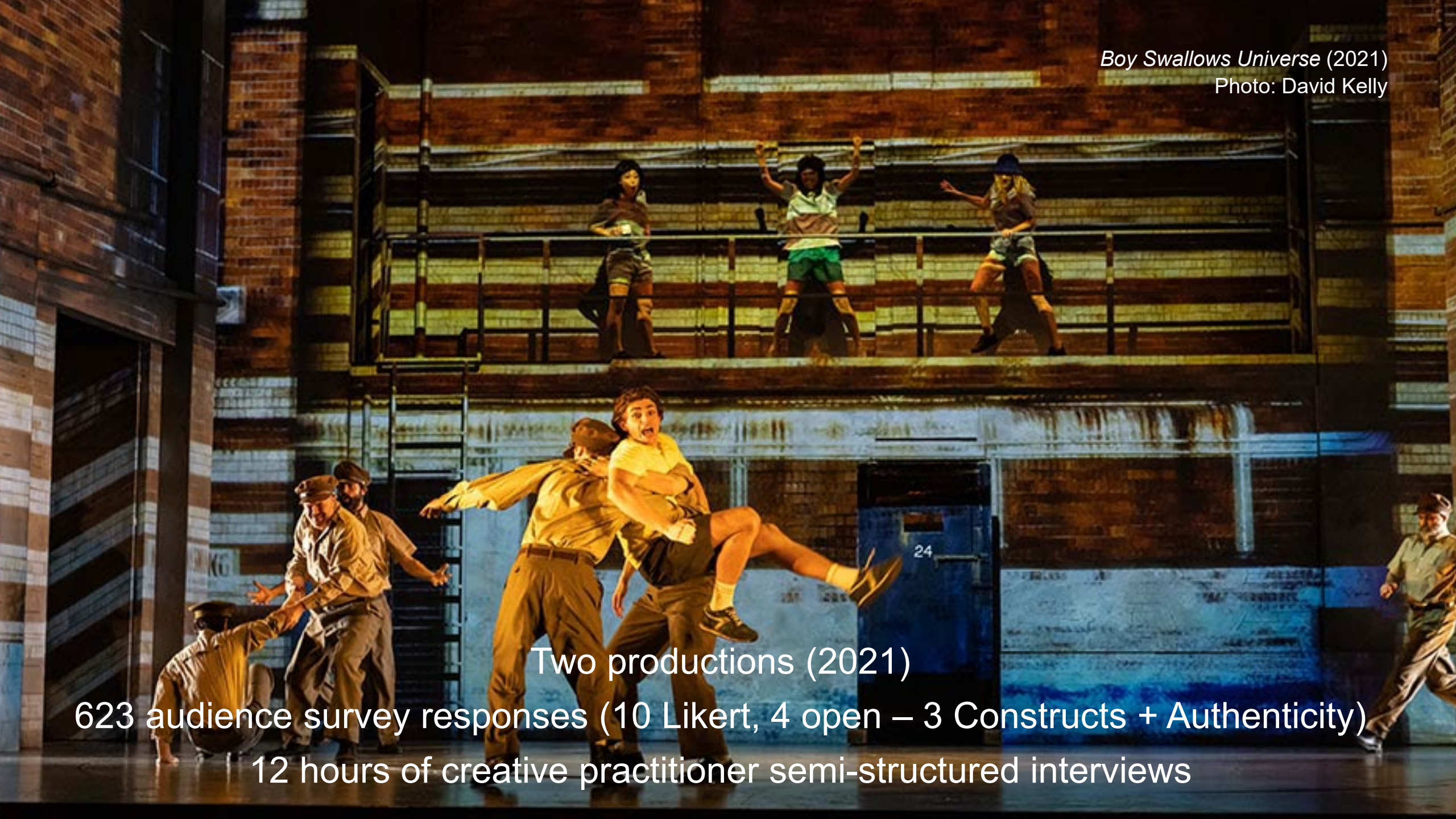Stage One + Stage Two

Ishmael (2021)
Photo: Dean Hansen

Two productions (2021)

623 audience survey responses (10 Likert, 4 open – 3 Constructs + Authenticity)

12 hours of creative practitioner semi-structured interviews

Statement of Agreement (*Boy Swallows Universe*)	Related Authenticity Construct	Mode (1 = strong agreement, 5= strong disagreement)	Percentage Strong Agreement
Do you think the way projection was used in Boy Swallows Universe stayed true to the Sam Strong's aims for the stage play?	Truthfulness (TRUTH1)	1 (n=234)	83.0
How would you rate the quality of the projection in Boy Swallows Universe?	Truthfulness (TRUTH2)	1 (n=208)	73.8
In your opinion, how believable were the interactions between the performers and the projection?	Believability (BELIEV1)	1 (n=225)	79.8
The projection felt like a natural part of the performance design	Believability (BELIEV2)	1 (n=252)	89.4
The way projection was used in Boy Swallows Universe made me feel connected to the performance	Emotional Engagement (ENGAG1)	1 (n=234)	83.0
Did the use of projection in Boy Swallows Universe effect your enjoyment of the performance?	Emotional Engagement (ENGAG2)	1 (n=240)	85.1
I felt that Boy Swallows Universe was an authentic performance	Authenticity (AUTH1)	1 (n=218)	77.0

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Correlations between perception of technology and a performance's authenticity

Binary logistic regression (Adjusted Odds Ratios)

- True to the director's creative intentions (TRUTH1) = **3.35 times the odds** of perceiving the performance as authentic (OR 3.350, 95% CI 1.496,7.504, p=0.003).

- Believable interactions between performers and technology (BELIEVE1) = **2.4 times the odds** (OR 2.407, 95%CI 1.171, 4.948, p=0.017).

- Technology positively affecting enjoyment (ENGAG2) **= 2.2 times the odds** (OR 2.210, 95% CI 1.015,4.813, p=0.046).

Taking into account all 3 variables, **the perception of the use of technology being true to the directors' intent** (TRUTH1) **had the strongest relationship to an audience member perceiving a performance as authentic**.

"Projection felt like a natural part of the design" (BELIEVE2) ceased to be statistically significant.

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"Authentic" digital scenography?

Audience + Creatives

Ishmael (2021)
Photo: Dean Hansen

Is truthful to *something* – be it the original text, a feeling, an experience, a creative choice.

Is real – in its experiences, its relationship or representation of the human condition or the real world

Offers believable experiences

Relies on believable relationships between performer and scenography

Offers emotional engagement and connection

Provides a sense of being in the world of the production

Can help to bring a story or physical design alive

Grounded in the story

Is integrated into the production and the story

Is expressed and defined in terms of the personal experience, drawing on emotive language.

Sometimes cannot be named or defined, but is instead a feeling – you know it when you experience it.

Can be a paradox, requiring you to hold two conflicting realities in your head at once

Is not accepted by all.

Boy Swallows Universe (2021)
Photo: David Kelly

Audience + Creatives

DESIGN FRAMEWORK KEYS

Ground the use of digital scenography in your creative intention
Develop a Conceptual Framework as a collective. Be truthful to your choices.

Develop a shared language to inform how you use and speak of digital scenography
Keep the use of digital scenography grounded in the story
Create believable relationships by balancing the digital and the live. Consider scale.
Begin early – believable relationships take time
Carefully integrating vision technology into the physical set and the story.

Create emotionally engaging moments by curating the rhythm, energy and flow of the digital scenography within the performance
Communicate often, being open to sharing your draft work and to give and receive feedback

ion and Social Justice

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Ishmael (2021)
Photo: Dean Hansen

Audience + Creatives

DESIGN FRAMEWORK KEYS

Consider using digital scenography to support a sense local connection, augment the physical design; support strong emotional moments in the story; bring the book to life on stage, and to bring the audience closer to the action.
Determine when one element needs to lead a process. Sound may be useful to begin.

Have patience with one another, attempt to understand the other design disciplines
Work to respect and trust
Critically interrogate the purpose of technology within the performance.
Ensure you can always justify 'Why'
Practice restraint
Know your own creative style
Be prepared to be agile, flexible and responsive – especially in the theatre.

d Social Justice

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Early development of *Ishmael* (2021)
Photo: Dean Hansen

**Cross-case analysis
Final Design Framework**

The digital's claim to its own "authenticity"?

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"Version 1":

Authenticity within Digital Performance: A New Framework to Understand the Relationship between Audience, Vision Technology and Scenography.

Rixon, Tessa, Moyle, Gene, Hutchison, Steph, & McKinney, Joslin (2021) Australasian Drama Studies, pp. 253-289.

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